

The Maiden All Forlorn

Fiction by Courtney Seligman

Erindale Tales

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*The Maiden
All Forlorn*

An Erindale Tale

Courtney Seligman



Erindale Publishing

2010

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*For Ruth Ballard,
who helped make this book possible*

*and Sheri,
who makes all things seem possible*

Notes

About meals

The Erindale Tales are set in a time (see the Afterword for more about that) when the evening meal was usually called supper, dinner was the main meal, whether served at noon or in the evening, and lunch was a light afternoon meal. However, to avoid confusing readers unaccustomed to such usage, I have used lunch to refer to the noon meal, dinner for a formal evening meal, and supper for informal evening meals.

Partial cast of characters (see end pages for a more detailed listing)

Moira — the maiden all forlorn

Gael — a farmer

Mia — Gael's wife

Their children —

Orran, Aralie, Brian and Liane

Ryan — Gael's neighbor

Sarah — Ryan's wife

Their children living at home —

Danny, Annie, and Jemmy

Their children living elsewhere —

Mark, Owen, Jacob and Lizzie

Michael, Ryan and Sarah's oldest, living nearby

Lily — Michael's wife

Michael and Lily's children —

Daisy, Feo and Rosie

The Maiden All Forlorn

Prologue

Why a maiden was needed...

“You are?” Gael exclaimed.

Mia hesitantly nodded. “I thought you’d be pleased...”

The dismayed look on Gael’s face was replaced with a loving one. “Of course, I am. It’s just a surprise.”

“It should hardly be a surprise, as often as we do this,” she pointed out, as she nestled into his embrace.

He wryly smiled as he ran a hand through the dark brown curls that framed her face, and gently kneaded the nape of her neck. Having sired four children in the first eight years of their marriage, he could hardly expect to go the rest of his life without siring another. And since it had been the best part of five years since Liane was born, you could say it was well past time for Mia to be past her time, again. Still, it wasn’t something he’d given any great thought to lately, even though their bedtime conversation often led to things that should have given him good cause to do so.

“You know, you should give serious thought to what we discussed last time.”

Mia sighed. “I know. It may be harder caring for four and carrying another than it was with only three. But they’re older now, and better able to take care of themselves, and I hate to pay for someone to watch them when I should be able to do it myself.”

He nuzzled the sensitive spot just above her collarbone. “I’ve told you before, not to worry about such things. It isn’t as if we can’t afford it. And I’d rather hire someone and keep you healthy than have you exhausted and ill, as you were toward the end with Liane.”

Mia shivered at his touch, and arched her neck in encouragement. “It isn’t just that. It’s the idea of having a stranger living with us. It might change everything. I’d much prefer to just have Annie help when she can. We know her, and the children love her, and she would go home in the evening, and we’d have the house to ourselves.”

“I understand your concern,” he said, as he widened the scope of his caresses, “but I’m sure we can deal with that by setting some rules. And though you can take care of things for now, once you swell we’ll need someone who can be here all the time — not like Annie, who’s off to town or busy at home more often than not.”

She ran a hand across the broad planes of his chest, sliding her fingers through the reddish-gold curls that grew there, and murmured, “Well, that’s a long way off, and I don’t think we should waste time discussing such things when there are other things we could do, that are much more interesting...”

Gael chuckled. “You always were a lusty lass.” And he had to admit that after the last few minutes of cuddling, he had other things on his mind, as well. Still, even as he moved to take advantage of her suggestion, he couldn’t help but warn her, “I’ll let you get away with that for now, but you can expect that later...”

“I know you’ll insist on discussing it later,” she said, as she adjusted her position to accommodate his actions, “but right now, all I care about is...” A surprisingly intense shudder passed through her, and for a few moments she was unable to speak; and by the time she recovered, she was too distracted to finish her statement.

He might have asked her to do so, if he’d had any concern about what she meant to say; but by then, he was more than a little distracted, himself. So for the moment, the thing was forgotten.

But not, of course, forever.

1

Six months later...

Jamie handed the packet to the secretary, and leaned against the wall to wait.

If he hadn't been here before, he might have tried sitting on one of the low benches on either side of the hall, but they had apparently been constructed so as to convince prospective patrons that the Home didn't waste money on unnecessary comforts, and were as uncomfortable as any seat he'd ever used; and aside from that, standing gave him a better view of the gorgeous creature seated on the other side of the hall. A petite little package, not much more than five feet tall, but what was packed into that five feet or so could keep a man busy for days, admiring it.

She made him think of strawberries and cream, she did, what with her bright red hair, and her creamy complexion, slightly flecked with a scattering of faint freckles numerous enough to set off her milk-white color, but not so numerous as to detract from her looks.

It was too bad she'd put her hair up in a bun. He'd love to see it down, tumbling across her shoulders and breasts, or for that matter, to get a better look at those breasts. Even confined as they were by her dark gray costume, they were a sight for sore eyes, and he would have relished the opportunity to release them from their wrapping and explore them — and the rest of her figure — at length. Of course, with only a few minutes before he'd be called, there wouldn't be time to lure her away, let alone any place to lure her to; but when you are dreaming, such details are of little importance — in fact, no importance at all.

A new hire, he supposed, based on the bag at her feet; or at least, he hoped. Not that he was in town all that often, but it was only a few miles to the Hall, and if she were free, and willing to be so with him, he'd be glad of any chance to be with her, no matter how infrequent.

Yes, almost certainly a new hire. Dressed like that, most likely, to impress the headmistress, who of all the women he knew, affected the most severe dress and manner. Not that any of the other women at the Home looked much better.

But this one was different. Even drably dressed as she was, she looked absolutely stunning, and if he could see more of her — well, he had little doubt of what he would see, as that body must have been made by the gods expressly for love.

Eighteen or nineteen, he'd guess. Too calm and self-assured to be a young miss, not that anyone who looked like her would ever be taken for a young miss. On the other hand, it was hard to imagine such a gorgeous girl being unattached at that age, and if she was a new hire, she'd have to be unattached; so perhaps a bit younger. Still, whatever her age, neither she nor he were getting any younger, and if he wasn't to waste what little time he had, he'd better do something about it.

Moira stared fixedly at the door on the other side of the corridor, doing the best she could to ignore the tall youth who was eyeing her in a completely unwarranted and unwanted way.

She supposed he wouldn't seem such a bad sort if he had better manners. His light brown hair was in need of a haircut, with pieces sticking out on one side with no care for what the rest was like, but his face was nicely shaped, and he had a good figure, albeit in the slight way of a young man who had yet to fill out. Eighteen or nineteen, she decided; certainly, no more than twenty. Still, old enough to know better than to stare at a young lady that way.

To her horror, he began to walk toward her in a lightly swaggering way that showed he was as full of himself as he was devoid of manners. In other circumstances she might have risen and fled down the corridor, but her escort was expected at any minute, and the headmistress wouldn't be pleased if she wasn't here when he arrived. So she adopted her severest expression, and hoped that would serve to fend off any advances.

Jamie seated himself close to her — close enough that he could have reached out and touched her, if he'd had any encouragement to do so — and admired the view. From this angle, her figure was even more alluringly displayed, filling his mind with thoughts of what might have been, if only he weren't stuck with escorting the new governess to the Hall. Ah, well. He should just count the blessings he had. Usually, he spent the time he waited in the company of

some girl of ten or twelve, and though he had nothing against such girls, they couldn't provide the kind of company this one could.

"Good morning, miss," he smilingly greeted her.

Moira turned and gave him the most supercilious stare she could manage, given the fact that in her low station, she hadn't much opportunity to use such stares. Not that she wasn't quite used to receiving them, but that was another matter entirely.

"I fear, sir, that we have not been introduced."

Despite the wintry tone in her voice, Jamie half detected and more than half imagined a soft sweetness beneath the frost, a sweetness that could warm a man's soul even if all he did was sit and talk with her. Not that he'd be content with just that for any length of time — not with those deep blue eyes staring at him. Even filled with disapproval, they were absolutely beautiful. He'd have liked to take her outside, and see what they looked like in the light. He felt sure they'd sparkle like the sea.

"Well, I don't see anyone about to introduce us, so we'll have to forego the usual formalities. I'm Jamie," he said, extending a hand in greeting. "And you are?"

Moira ignored his hand, and continued her effort to stare him down. "I am a young lady who is not in the habit of being accosted by young men not of my acquaintance," she said in a tone so cold that many men would have turned tail, rather than risk frostbite; but though Jamie blinked, he didn't back down.

"My, but we are proper and prim, aren't we?" Leaning forward, he grasped a coppery curl between his fingers.

Moira started, and would have pulled away, but since she edged away when he sat down, she was already at the end of the bench and had nowhere to go but the floor; so all she could do was grit her teeth, and steel her voice still more.

"I would thank you to remove your hand from my person."

"Just a moment," Jamie murmured, as he tucked the curl into her bun. "You have a loose curl here, and as severely as you've made yourself up, I presume you didn't mean to achieve such an adorable effect."

“I...” Moira swallowed hard, and tried to calm her nerves. “I am not in the habit of being addressed so, by some... strange man.”

Jamie’s hazel eyes roguishly twinkled. “I presume you mean by a stranger; or at least, I hope you do. But that could be remedied, if you don’t mind. I’m in town once or twice a week, and if you are free sometime, we could try to get together, and get better acquainted.”

Moira paled at his suggestion, as she had little doubt what he meant by ‘get better acquainted’. Icy fingers seemed to crawl up her spine, while she struggled to think of something she could do to free herself from this nightmare, save for running or screaming; but fortunately, the door to the headmistress’ office opened, and her secretary said, “You may come in, now.”

Each of them started to rise, Jamie disappointed to have been called so soon, and Moira thankful that her ordeal was at an end.

“No, not you, sir. It will be a few minutes yet. The young miss is to come in.”

Jamie nodded and sat down, while Moira picked up her bag and walked toward the open doorway. She might have done so more comfortably if she hadn’t felt sure that Jamie was enjoying the view of her backside. As she reached the doorway she turned, to determine whether her suspicions were correct. Jamie smiled broadly and nodded his head, and a flush spread through her as she turned and went in. No manners, she thought, no manners at all.

Jamie grinned as the girl turned and stopped in the doorway, admiring the way the light from the window beyond illumined her, catching the highlights in her hair, and making her figure more breathtaking than ever. Yes, he thought, if she’s going to be here, I’ll have to do all that I can to make her acquaintance — and more.



For the third time in as many months Rose prepared to bid Moira goodbye, and wished she didn’t have to.

In three weeks it would be fourteen years since Moira entered her life. Fourteen years in which she loved and

cherished her, and wished she could keep her forever. And now they were to end; or at least she had to hope they would end, for the good of the girl and the Home.

There was the possibility that as on the two previous occasions, Moira's new mistress would be so displeased by her good looks that she would send her packing before she'd had a chance to unpack, but that wasn't likely this time. Hobbs Hall's mistress was a very accomplished and attractive young woman, and unlikely to feel threatened by Moira. So she shouldn't be coming back anytime soon, if ever; which would, of course, be the very best thing for her. The Hall stood at the pinnacle of local society, and her position there would be as good as any that a girl from the Home had ever aspired to. Still, it was hard — ever so hard — to let her go.

Her secretary ushered Moira into the office, and as she took a seat, Rose essayed a smile that she hoped didn't look as pained as it felt.

“Good morning, Moira.”

“Good morning, Mistress Brown.”

“How are you feeling?”

“A bit nervous...”

Rose nodded. “I expect you would be — especially after the other occasions.”

Moira bit her lip, and nodded. It had been humiliating to be sent back like that, even though through no fault of her own. Humiliating, and ever so disappointing for the headmistress, who had done so much to help her, and been so poorly rewarded for her efforts.

“I will do my best to keep this position,” she promised.

“I know you will. And I have every reason to believe that the mistress of Hobbs Hall is not the fool your previous employers were. So hopefully, this is the last we shall see of each other for some time.” Even as she said it, Rose wished she'd phrased that differently. She didn't want Moira to feel she wasn't welcome to come back and visit, and quickly noted that.

Moira wistfully smiled, and nodded. “It would be nice to see the children, and of course you. I hope you know how grateful I am for all you've done for me.”

Rose smiled. “It was a pleasure to work with you. I've

never had a more competent or diligent pupil.”

“No,” Moira said, “I didn’t mean that, though I do appreciate it. I mean... well, as you know, most people would think my circumstances... unfortunate.”

Rose nodded, but said nothing, lest she say more than she should.

“But you have made the Home a real home for me, and I could never think myself anything less than the most fortunate of women, to have been cared for by you.”

Tears welled in Rose’s eyes, and in a voice choked with emotion, she thanked Moira for the lovely sentiment — one that she said “means more to me than you could ever know.” Then she made a show of going through the papers on her desk.

And it was just a show, especially when she turned to her cabinet to search for a missing page. For the only thing wrong was that she needed time to pull herself together, and once again convince herself of the necessity of the thing. If only the Home’s primary benefactor hadn’t reduced his support, or she had succeeded in her effort to replace the lost funds, she could have kept Moira on as an aide or teacher, as she had already done, albeit without pay save for room and board, for a year. But things had gone from bad to worse, and now it was let Moira go, or someone else; and the only reasonable choice was to give the training she’d provided her ward the use for which it was intended.

“Ah, here it is!” she exclaimed, taking a paper out of a pile she’d already gone through. “All in proper order, after all. So,” she added, fixing Moira with a steady gaze that belied the turmoil within her, “is there anything you can think of that we should discuss before you leave?”

Moira shook her head. “No. You’ve prepared me so well that I feel... well, not entirely at ease, but as much so as possible.”

Rose nodded. “It is always hard to start a new life, as you do today; but no one could possibly be better prepared for, or more deserving of that life, than you.”

“Thank you. Those would be wonderful words, coming from anyone else; but coming from you, they mean...” Moira raised a kerchief to her eyes, and Rose rang the bell to summon her assistant. Best to get the girl on her way,

before they both broke down in tears.

“Yes, ma’am?” Janet inquired, as she poked her head through the door.

“Would you please fetch Moira’s escort?”

The secretary nodded and went out, while Moira wiped her tears and wondered when her escort arrived. It wasn’t that long since she came in, and the only one about when she did was the lout who accosted her, and...

A horrifying thought struck her, and as the door opened and Jamie walked in, was confirmed.



Jamie whistled a happy tune as he slowly drove the cart along the rutted road that circled Benton. He could have gone through the town and saved considerable time, but it was an absolutely beautiful mid-summer day, and he saw no reason to avoid the scenic route, especially since the longer it took, the more time he’d have to get acquainted with the girl sitting beside him.

Moira had been quietly brooding ever since they left the Home, and Jamie ‘assisted’ her into the cart, taking what she considered an unnecessary amount of time to release her. He insisted he was only making sure she was properly seated before he let go, but she felt certain, given his behavior at the Home, that he had ulterior motives in holding her for so long.

Still, he hadn’t said or done anything untoward since they turned onto the road, and she would probably be seeing him from time to time at the Hall, so it seemed a good idea to get into his good graces — at least, if she could do so without getting into his bed, as well. She turned toward him, and forced a smile.

“You seem quite cheerful today.”

Jamie turned to look at her, and smiled broadly. “And why shouldn’t I be? It’s a beautiful day, with the land and sky doing their very best to gladden us with their beauty, and the most beautiful girl in the whole valley sitting beside me, putting the rest of the world to shame.”

Moira flushed at the grandiloquent compliment, and stammered, “I... hardly think that likely...”

Jamie grinned. "Then you have been using a very uncomplimentary mirror, my dear. For from where I sit, the view is far better in your direction than any other."

Moira had been the object of men's comments on a few occasions, but most were more lewd than complimentary, and she had little experience with such well-meaning, yet still unwanted banter. As a result she stared at him, nonplussed, for a few moments before replying.

"I hope you won't take this as a personal insult, Jamie, but I'm not looking for a... a boyfriend, so to speak."

Jamie laughed, a low, throaty laugh as pleasant-sounding as it was amused. "I'd have hardly thought so, given how severely you rebuffed my advances."

She flushed, even though she didn't think her treatment of him at all unwarranted, given the way he'd behaved. Still, she felt she should offer some explanation.

"I... well... I was expecting my escort, and aside from any other feelings I might have had, I didn't want to be caught talking to some... young man... when he arrived."

Jamie arched an eyebrow. "Ah, I'm coming up in the world, I am. First I was merely a boy, and now I'm a young man. Soon I'll be a grown man, and able to stand on my own two feet."

Moira blinked and despite herself, allowed a smile to play upon her lips, and noting that Jamie lowered his voice and reverently recited, "And she smiled, and the heavens opened, and the gods wept to see such beauty..."

A giggle escaped her, and she shook her head. "What do you do? Spend all your time reading books of romantic poetry?"

"Do you think that would help convince you of my interest?" he asked, batting his eyes in a way that would have put any young girl to shame.

Moira laughed. "Nothing at all would be required to convince me of your interest. The problem seems to be, how to convince you of my lack of interest..."

A hurt look came over his face, and Moira felt a small pang at having wounded him. He did seem a pleasant sort, and she didn't have anything against him. She just didn't want him to think of her as a would-be conquest.

"Jamie, don't feel badly. It isn't you... it really isn't. You

seem a very nice lad. I'm just not old enough to get involved with anyone. At least, not in that way."

Jamie's face recovered its composure so quickly that she couldn't help but feel his hurt look had been just as practiced as the others. "Not old enough? Surely you aren't going to wait until you're as old as the headmistress to start looking for a man."

"No..." she said, feeling more than a little desire to defend the headmistress, but not wanting to be diverted from her thought. "I suppose I might be interested when I'm sixteen or so, but until then..."

"When you're sixteen? Aren't you well past sixteen?"

Moira shook her head. "No... I just turned fourteen a couple of weeks ago... I think..."

He practically gaped at her. "Fourteen? You think?"

"Yes. As a foundling, there was no way to know how old I was when I was brought to the Home; but it will be fourteen years, later this month."

Jamie looked her up and down, and a shiver passed through him. Fourteen? God. How could he ever...

Well, he ruefully thought, how could he not? Given her looks and manner, anyone would think her at least eighteen. And even if they didn't, some men liked their girls young. But he wasn't one of them. When he was with a woman, he wanted her to be a woman in every sense of the word, not a child masquerading as a woman.

He shook his head. "Fourteen," he murmured, obviously stunned by the revelation.

Moira was surprised by his reaction, as none of the men she'd had to discourage seemed to care how old she was, even when she was just starting to fill out. Then he did something that surprised her still more.

He slowed the cart, took her hand, and gently squeezed it. "I'm sorry, miss. Truly sorry. I had no idea, but I still shouldn't have acted so."

"No, you shouldn't; but I don't think it so terrible on account of my age. After all, you didn't know. But you did know I didn't want you to behave so."

"Well, I thought I only had a few minutes to get to know you," he sheepishly replied, "so I was a bit more forward than usual."

“Only a bit?” she asked, with amusement.

“Well, a lot; but I’ve never seen a girl half as lovely as you, and I really wanted to get to know you, and didn’t know if I’d have another chance to do it.”

Moira was touched by the warmth with which he delivered his statement. But her time at the Home had given her a dim view of certain things, and as she considered her reply her thoughts took an unexpected turn, and a shudder passed through her. Withdrawing her hand from his, she turned away, and in a small voice said, “If we’re to reach the Hall before nightfall, perhaps we should go a bit faster.”

Jamie gave her a puzzled look, but nodded and said, “I suppose you’re right.” He clucked at the mare, and she resumed her normal pace.

For some time they continued in silence, though every now and then he would look at Moira, shake his head and sigh, then turn his attention back to the road. Never had he so wanted to please a girl, or so miserably failed. He hadn’t expected her undying gratitude, but he was almost as taken aback by her reaction to his apology as he was by her far too few years.

Moira wasn’t feeling very happy either, and each time he heaved a sigh, she felt even worse. She wasn’t anxious to explain what happened, but knew if she didn’t the silence enveloping them would soon become unbearable. So after a while, she made a hesitant effort to speak.

“I... that is... you needn’t...” She shook her head, as Jamie turned to her.

“I’m sorry I offended you,” he started, but she raised her hand as if for him to stop, so he did.

“It’s not your fault. I know you meant well. It’s just...” She looked away, and her voice took on a pensive tone.

“I know that the world prizes beauty... and I can’t blame it or you for that. Perhaps if I’d been born to a well-to-do family, I might even try to use my looks to win the man of my dreams...”

“You wouldn’t have to try that hard,” Jamie noted.

She shook her head, a wry smile on her lips. “Perhaps not. But you see, for a foundling — for any girl without the protection of a good family — exceptional good looks are

more a curse than a blessing.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“The paths of beauty do not always lead to happiness, Jamie. There’s a tale told at the Home of a girl — ‘poor Emily’ — who had a very sad end. And no one, least of all I, would want to follow in her footsteps. It was the thought of her fate that made me shudder, not you or your words. They just had the misfortune to set my mind on a path which led to that end.”

He gave her a rueful smile. “I’m sorry to have caused you distress, no matter how unwitting.”

“I know; and I’m sorry to have caused you distress, as well. I greatly enjoyed your cheerful banter, even as brash as it was, and am sorry I put an end to it.”

“Well,” he said, “now that we’ve both apologized so nicely, perhaps we could pick up where we left off?”

“And perhaps,” she suggested, “we could even become... friends?”

Jamie shook his head. “Of course. That’s just what I want. To be ‘friends’ with a girl I’d have moved the world to romance. That’s the story of my life, that is.” Of course, that wasn’t really the story of his life, as he’d known several girls in a far more than friendly way; but aside from none of them being even half as pretty as Moira, he saw no reason to let the truth get in the way of a good story.

“Well,” she replied, uncertainly, “I don’t think being friends is such a terrible thing... do you?”

“No, it isn’t — and truth be told, given the way I acted earlier, I should be glad that you’re willing to make such an offer. But you can’t blame me for feeling sorry that you’re years too young to be courted.”

Tears rimmed Moira’s eyes. “But I’m not too young to need a friend.”

Jamie was stricken to have brought tears to her eyes, and he stared at her for a few moments, too taken aback to try one of his usual sallies. Finally, sighing deeply, he held out his hand.

“All right, then... friends...”

Moira placed her hand in his, and shyly smiled as he gently squeezed it.

A sly smile spread over Jamie’s face, and a twinkle lit

his eye. "I don't suppose you'd care to give your new friend a friendly hug..."

Moira laughed, and shook her head. "You are absolutely incorrigible."

He grinned, and nodded. "Nailed it on the head that time, you did."

Moira suddenly felt a surprising desire to give him such a hug. She'd felt quite a sense of loss when she left the Home and Mistress Brown's tearful embrace, and now that she and Jamie had reached an understanding, the touch of his hand on hers felt very warm and comforting. For a long moment she wavered; then she sighed a deep sigh and abandoned the mad idea. "It would be nice if such a thing were possible; but right now..."

"It would be better to get my new friend to her new home, before I get both of us fired... right?"

She gave him a wry smile. "That does sound a good idea."

He gave her hand another squeeze, then turned his attention to the mare, and started to whistle a tune that seemed a pleasant accompaniment to their journey. Before long Moira found herself humming along, and with a sigh of contentment she settled against her seat and thought, *Yes, it is indeed a most beautiful day.*

2

Thanks to their leisurely pace it was almost noon when the cart lumbered up the hill, and approached Hobbs Hall. To Moira the Hall seemed a very impressive pile of brick and stone. And in comparison to most of the other homes in Benton it was impressive, as it was two very tall stories high, and even without its commanding position would have overshadowed all but the grandest of its rivals.

Once they entered the estate, Jamie began a running commentary on the fields, orchards and outbuildings they passed, which he continued as they neared the Hall.

“It’s a grand house, it is. Nearly thirty rooms, not even counting the baths and privies that were put in when Hobbs married his second wife, a few years ago, and are as up to date as any in the valley.”

Moira nodded as she admired the architectural details that adorned the home, from the broad columns flanking the entry, to the whimsical turrets which rose on its sides.

“The second story is mostly bedrooms for the family, guest rooms, and the nursery. The room next to the nursery is reserved for the governess, so I expect you will have that when the old governess leaves, the end of next week.”

“Yes,” Moira agreed, “I suppose that I shall.” She hoped that the room was on this side of the house, as the view down the valley would be spectacular. Still, any room, if truly her own, would be a tremendous improvement over sharing quarters with up to a dozen roommates, as she had often done at the Home.

“The first story,” Jamie went on, “is mostly dining and entertaining rooms. Grand big ones, too, as Hobbs is a man of importance, and some of his parties quite large.”

She nodded again. At a home like this, you would have to have such gatherings, to maintain your position in the community.

“There are a number of smaller rooms, for the servants, off to the side of the kitchen. That’s where I stay, and I suppose you’ll be put up in one of those till the end of next week, but it will be up to the housekeeper to decide.”

“I imagine so...”

“Oh... and since the butler and housekeeper are such sticklers for proper manners, I should tell you who is who, and where they are in the pecking order.”

So while the well groomed landscape slowly passed by, Jamie told her about the members of the staff, who seemed far more numerous than the staff at the Home, despite having only six family members to care for, instead of dozens of infants and children. And as they approached the broad steps that led to the entry she learned that though officially one of the lower-ranking house servants, Jamie actually served as a jack of all trades for Hobbs, from blacking his boots and running odd errands, to serving as a companion for his children, which partly explained his brash behavior. For aside from being useful in amusing his charges, he would need a happy-go-lucky attitude to endure the jealous abuse that higher-ranking servants might see fit to pile upon him — as she was soon to see for herself.

For as he hopped out of the cart and came round to help her, a very tall, stern-looking man came striding down the steps and approached them.

“You’re late,” he reproached Jamie. “You should have been back nearly an hour ago.”

“I’m sorry, Blake,” Jamie replied, “but the mare was a bit lame, and I had to let her walk it out, slow-like.”

Blake’s nostrils flared. “Don’t try to fox me, you lout. She was walking just fine when you drove up.”

Jamie nodded as he reached for Moira’s hand. “Yes, but only because, as I said, I let her walk it out.”

Blake’s eyes narrowed as if disbelieving the lie, and Moira, not caring for Blake’s high-handed manner, came to Jamie’s defense.

“I can affirm he is telling the truth,” she said, as she descended from the cart.

Blake looked at her — looked long and hard at her, as if assessing her character as well as her appearance, and finding fault with both — before turning to Jamie again. “Take the cart to the stable, and get back to your work. No matter the reason you’re late you’re an hour behind, and if you don’t get done, I’ll see that Edwards gets an earful.”

Jamie stood his ground, nodding toward the entry. “I was just going to walk the young lady to the door. As the

new governess, she shouldn't have to come in through the side. Not the first time."

"I shall take care of the young 'lady'," Blake sneeringly replied. "You get back to your work."

Moira looked hesitantly at Jamie, who wryly smiled as he released her hand. "I hope you enjoyed your ride, miss, despite its taking so long."

Moira smiled back, and nodded. "I did. Thank you so much for pointing things out to me."

"You're welcome, miss," he replied as he got in the cart; then, pointedly ignoring Blake, he clucked to the mare and drove off.

Blake stared after him, then turned to Moira. "Come on, then, and I'll take you to the housekeeper."

Moira nodded, and trailed behind him as he strode up the stairs, apparently intent on making full use of his exceptionally long legs. Given the premium put on height for footmen, she supposed those legs were responsible for his position as first footman, which in turn would explain, even if it didn't excuse, his arrogant behavior. Of course, there was the possibility that she'd mixed up his name and position, but the legs seemed to attest to the accuracy of her memory, and in any event she hardly cared if she'd gotten it right, since he hadn't bothered to introduce himself, had been very rude to Jamie, and was making her practically run to keep up with him. She just hoped that whatever his position, she wouldn't have to deal with him much.

Which, as it turned out, was very little for now, for after leading her to the housekeeper he turned and left without so much as a word, leaving her alone with the matronly woman.

The housekeeper looked her up and down just as thoroughly as Blake had, and shook her head. "A pretty girl, I see. I suppose you'll be having airs because of your position and looks. But don't think that will get you anywhere, round here. You may be in charge of the nursery once the current governess goes, but I run the house, and you'll be best served to remember that."

"Oh, no," Moira protested. "I don't expect any special treatment. I wasn't accustomed to it at the Home, and I would never expect it here."

The housekeeper seemed to be studying her carefully, and a smile lit her face as Moira finished.

"I expect that you mean that; and glad I am to hear it, as it means we shall get on well. Now come with me, and I'll have you shown to your room."

Moira nodded, and followed after the housekeeper, hurrying to keep up with her surprisingly quick steps. My goodness, she thought, is everyone here used to running from place to place?

Given their pace it was just a few moments before she was introduced to Jenny, one of the housemaids.

"Pleased to meet you, miss," Jenny said, as she led her down yet another hallway.

"I'm pleased to meet you as well, Jenny. But please, call me Moira."

"That I'll do, if you wish it — at least when our betters aren't around."

Jenny stopped at one of the doors that lined the corridor, and opened it.

"Oh, this is lovely," Moira exclaimed, as she entered the room. It was small, but it had a fair-sized bed, a small dresser and chair, and most wonderful of all, a window with a lovely view of the mountains.

"Yes, I know," Jenny said, with a hint of wistfulness. "It's my room, or at least was and will be again, once you're in your own room upstairs."

"Oh, no," Moira said in dismay. "I shouldn't put you out of your room."

Jenny shook her head. "That's all right. It's only for a week, and it wouldn't be proper for you to share with another. And I don't mind, really, as I'll be rooming with Katie, who is a grand girl, and we should have a lot of fun talking about our beaux while I'm there."

"Well... if you're sure..."

Jenny laughed. "You haven't been at a place like this before, have you? Even if I were dead set against it, and you as well, it wouldn't make any difference. You're the new governess, and you shall have a room of your own, whether you want one or not."

Moira blinked. She had known that coming to a place like Hobbs Hall would involve a different way of living than

at the Home, but she hadn't expected things to be quite so formal as far out in the country as Benton was.

"I see..."

Jenny smiled, a warm friendly smile that left Moira little doubt that she really meant what she said about not minding things, and nodded toward the dresser. "I've moved my things out, so you can settle right in. There isn't any formal lunch for the servants today, as there is an important dinner party tonight, and everyone is busy preparing for it; but if you want something to eat, just stop by the kitchen and ask."

Moira nodded, sat her bag on the bed, and looked round the room again before turning to Jenny. "Thank you. I promise I'll do my very best to return your room to you in the fine condition it was in when I arrived."

Jenny laughed again. "No doubt of that, as I've been assigned the task of taking care of your room; so don't you worry your pretty little head about that." Then, as Blake and the housekeeper had done, she looked Moira up and down quite thoroughly, making her feel for all the world like some kind of specimen, which had to be studied before you knew what to do with it.

"Just wait till the rest of them see you. A real beauty, you are, and all the lads will be wishing you fair game, and all the lasses glad that you aren't, being bound for upstairs as you are."

Moira bit her lip and nodded uncertainly, not being sure how to reply to such a statement, even given the good cheer on Jenny's face. "I hope that won't be a problem."

"A problem?" Jenny laughingly replied. "Not on my account. My lad is too besotted with me to look at any other girl, even if she does outshine the sun and stars. Of course," she mused, with a twinkle in her eyes, "Katie's lad, Jamie, might be another matter."

Moira blinked in surprise. "Katie's lad?"

"Well, perhaps I shouldn't say her lad, as neither seems interested in a serious relationship, despite the time they spend together. But that's why he might take an interest in you. He's the sort who would fall head over heels for someone like you."

Moira wryly smiled, for as much as she'd come to like

Jamie, his behavior certainly proved him that sort.

“Well, I’d best get to work, or Missus Lamb — that’s the housekeeper, you know — will have my head for dawdling. But if you need anything, and one of the other girls can’t get it for you, just have them send for me, and I’ll be happy to help.”

And with that Jenny smilingly bade her goodbye, and left her alone with her thoughts.

Some of those thoughts centered on the fact that she would soon assume the duties for which she’d been hired, and given the apparently rigid order of things, would have to be careful how she did them, lest she lose yet another position. But some centered on one particular young man, and the conflicting feelings she had about him.

It was unsettling to find that Jamie was, perhaps, more like her earlier assessment than the more generous one she had at the end of their journey. A bit of a rogue, or perhaps even more than a bit. And yet, what right did she have to be upset, to find that he had a girl? She had, after all, made it quite clear that she wasn’t available for wooing, and although she liked him immensely, she didn’t want to be ‘that’ kind of friend. Still, she had taken comfort from having a friend in a place where she might well need one, and it was disappointing to realize that given his relationship with Katie, she might not be able to enjoy his company as much as she’d hoped.

Still, it wasn’t as though Jamie was the only one here. Jenny seemed a very friendly sort, and so might some of the others be. So perhaps the uneasy feelings she had after the unpleasant meeting with Blake, and the intimidating one with the housekeeper, were overblown. After all, this was a very fine place, and she had been given a very fine position; and though taking care of Hobbs’ younger children might keep her very busy, she was almost certain to enjoy being here, once she was settled in.

So rather than sitting and brooding, she put her things away, then went in search of the kitchen, and whatever food and companionship its staff was willing to provide.

3

“What?” Cecily exclaimed.

Edwards repeated what he'd said, and waited while his mistress considered the matter.

“Thirteen? But we can't have thirteen for dinner! Aside from being an unlucky number, I'll not have our guests think us unable to provide a proper dinner party.”

The butler nodded. “I understand. But with half the young ladies of note at the seashore this week, I'm not sure we can find another on such short notice.”

“I know; but we have to do something. I won't have dinner ruined just because Black was too inconsiderate to let us know he was bringing his assistant. I can't. The mayor will be here, and his wife, who is the biggest gossip in town; and I'll not have her think me an incompetent hostess.”

If it had been his place to do so, Edwards would have said that the mayor's wife could hardly think Cecily an incompetent hostess, even if she couldn't find another woman to round out the dinner party. His mistress was, in his opinion, an extremely competent and charming young woman, and a tremendous asset to her husband, who had been lucky to find in his second wife an even better match than he made with his first. Very lucky indeed, as her beauty had made her quite sought after, and despite her mere twenty-two years, she had a wit and intelligence that served him even better than her looks in her position as mistress of Hobbs Hall. But no matter how highly others might think of her, he knew she would be unhappy with herself if she didn't rise to the occasion, so he tried to think of someone who might be a suitable addition to the party.

“Perhaps... the governess?” he hesitantly proposed. It was a very hesitant proposal, as the governess was so proper and prim that her presence would be bound to deflate that portion of the party which was subject to her companionship, such as it was. Particularly if seated near Edgar and Elisabeth, who despite having left the nursery years ago, would definitely be dismayed to have their former caretaker there.

“Good god, no,” Cecily said, with horror. “I’ll not have that priss spoiling the evening. Not after the last time. We’ll have to send runners to the other homes, and see if there is someone, anyone, who is still available.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t likely, given the late hour,” he pointed out, “but of course I shall do as you wish.”

Cecily distractedly nodded as she considered the ruination of her plans for the evening. All because that wretched financier couldn’t be bothered to send even the briefest of notes, to tell them about his assistant. If he weren’t so important, she’d have been sorely tempted to tell him that if he wasn’t willing to abide by the slightest of social graces, he needn’t have bothered to come. But wishing to do such things, and actually doing them, were entirely different matters. One could silently wish any number of things, but when your husband was one of the pillars of the community, there were few such things you could actually say or do without untoward consequences.

Edwards moved toward the door, but before reaching it, turned and thoughtfully looked at his mistress.

“On the other hand...” he began.

Cecily looked at him with eager hope. “Do you have another suggestion?”

The butler nodded. “I don’t know if she would be in any way prepared for such an evening, as she just arrived today, but there is... the new governess...”

Cecily nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, of course. Please have her come see me at once.”

“I’ll send for her immediately,” he said. “But I expect I should still send runners out...” he added, with a slight note of questioning.

“Of course. Still, it won’t hurt to be sure we have a bird in the hand, in case we can’t find one in the bushes.”

And so it was that on the very first day of her new employment Moira was, to her great surprise and even greater dismay, invited to dinner.



“This will never do,” Moira breathlessly exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, love,” Jenny mumbled through a

mouthful of pins. "I'm used to this sort of thing, and even as little time as we have, I'll make sure you look every inch a lady."

Moira hardly felt that she looked a lady, half stuffed as she was into one of Miss Hobbs' gowns. And literally only half stuffed, for Elisabeth, though about the same height as Moira, was a bit smaller, especially 'above', and aside from the waist being tight, there was an abundance of bare bosom bulging, and threatening to do more than just bulge, above the low neckline. No, not like a lady at all, she thought, for even a trollop might be better covered. Not that she'd ever seen such a woman that she knew of, but she had heard about them, and if any man could look at her, half undressed as she was, and not think her one, she'd have been quite amazed to hear it.

"Surely you can do something to cover my breast a bit more," she anxiously suggested.

Jenny stuck another pin into the gown. "Once I've let this out, you'll fit into it better; and you'd be surprised what a bit of lace tucked in at the top can do. Now," she added, removing the pins from her mouth, "let's get you out of this, so I can work on it."

Moira gladly nodded assent, and as Jenny loosed the instruments of torture that had so tightly confined most of her torso, breathed the first deep breath she'd had in some time, and sank onto the bed.

"I'm sorry, Jenny. I know you're doing your best, and I should be grateful."

"That's all right, miss," Jenny said, without looking up from her work. "I'd be nervous myself, if I were in your shoes. Not, of course," she hastily added, "that I don't think you up to the challenge. It's just not something I'd be able to carry off."

Moira ruefully considered how very confident everyone seemed to be of her ability to rise to the challenge. Mistress Hobbs, the butler, the housekeeper, and Jenny all seemed quite sure that given her excellent training, and her equally excellent appearance and manner, she would prove a fine dinner companion, and save the honor of the Hall. Just what she wanted to do, her first day here. And from the look of the shadows on the hills, in less than three hours, at

that. How in the world Jenny was going to finish the dress, let alone make her look even half a lady was beyond her, and she couldn't help but mention that.

"Now, don't you go worrying yourself about that none," Jenny muttered, as she furiously worked on the gown. "Just lie down and rest, so you can enjoy the evening. After all, the governess doesn't eat with the Master and Mistress that often, and you should take advantage of the situation, instead of worrying about it."

Moira smiled weakly. "I suppose you're right..."

"And besides," Jenny observed off-handedly, "the way you look, none of the men will be thinking about anything other than how gorgeous you are, and not a one of the women of anything save wishing themselves as lovely as you."

Moira didn't want to mention that that was one of the things she was most worried about, so she bit her lip and nodded, and said perhaps she would take Jenny's advice. So while the afternoon slowly wound down, and the hour of her trial approached, she lay down, and did what she could to still the turmoil inside her.



"And this is our new governess, Moira," Cecily said, as she introduced her to those assembled for dinner, "who has graciously consented to join us on her first day here, before starting her work in the nursery, in the morning."

"Enchanting," Squire Rundlewood said, as he bent slightly to acknowledge Moira's presence. "Absolutely enchanting. It's a good thing my governess didn't look so beautiful, or I'd have learnt even less than I did."

"She does look smashing in that gown," said Edgar, Hobbs' oldest. "Don't you agree, Elisabeth?"

Elisabeth was already envious of how spectacular Moira looked in her old gown, and her brother's insinuation did nothing to ease her jealousy. Still, she had no intention of saying anything to distress someone who had been put in an awkward position, and must feel ill at ease. So she put on her best smile and replied, "She does, indeed; but I hope she is as gracious as she is attractive, and will forgive our

talking about her as though she weren't here."

Moira was more than just ill at ease; for despite Jenny's efforts she was having a difficult time taking a breath, and between lack of air and the tension that filled her, felt as though she might pass out if she didn't sit down, quite soon. And it didn't help her composure one bit that her breasts, though no longer threatening to disgrace her, were still far more amply displayed than she would have ever wished in such company or, for that matter, any company she could imagine. But Elisabeth's greeting did much to relax her, and she gave the dark-haired girl a grateful smile.

"I just hope you don't mind my intruding upon your dinner party."

"Not at all," Edgar interjected. "It will be nice to get to know you in a social setting, instead of the more formal way in which we were introduced to our own governess."

"Yes," Elisabeth added. "She was an excellent governess, but I feel sure you will be far more pleasant to have around."

"Very pleasant, indeed," Rundlewood agreed. "If only I were still a lad, I would be happy to place myself in her hands." And in fact, despite his fifty-four years he would have been quite happy to do so anyway, as between the beauty of her face and form, and the way the latter was displayed by her gown, he felt a considerable heat rising within him.

Fortunately for Moira's self-composure, none of the remaining members of the dinner party were any less welcoming, and as she was seated she breathed a sigh of relief, and looking around the table, tried to recall who was whom out of the dozen individuals she had just been introduced to.

She already knew Mistress Hobbs, who spent some time quizzing her before deciding she would attend the party, and the forty-something gentleman at the head of the table was her employer, Master Hobbs. She didn't know whether the man seated next to Hobbs and across from her mistress was Stanley Black or Alfred Brown, as the financier and his assistant were introduced to her at the same time, and though she had no doubt that the financier was the one next to Hobbs, she couldn't remember which

name he bore. Not that it mattered, as she wouldn't be expected to carry on any conversation with the august personages at that end of the table.

And august they were, as the man next to her mistress was none other than Mayor Benbridge, and the woman opposite him was his wife, Alice. She hadn't seen the mayor before, but his wife had been to the Home several times, to show her devotion to the welfare of even the lowliest members of the community, and though they had never spoken, Moira would have recognized her anywhere.

The strikingly attractive blonde next to the mayor was Elaine Danvers, the wife of the lawyer seated to Moira's right. Across from her and to Moira's immediate left was, of all people, Squire Rundlewood, the most important landowner in the district — even more so than Hobbs, despite the greater grandeur of Hobbs' ancient name.

At Moira's far right Elisabeth Hobbs, who despite a startlingly frail and pale appearance practically radiated good cheer, was chatting with Catherine and Violet Woods, two pleasant-looking girls of about the same age as Miss Hobbs (sixteen or seventeen, if she correctly remembered the multitude of facts poured into her this afternoon), while Edgar sat, content to merely watch and listen, like a thorn quietly hiding amongst three roses.

And aside from Black or Brown — whatever the financier's assistant was called — who was seated across from Moira, that was it. Fourteen for dinner, as her mistress seemed to think so very important. A far more auspicious number than thirteen, even if attaining it required placing Moira in a difficult position.

And after all, who would have thought that such a little thing could lead to such disaster?



Moira sighed as Jenny undid the laces and helped her out of the gown. It was good to be back in her room, all in one piece, more or less, and especially to be out of Rundlewood's clutches.

"Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Moira shook her head. "No. Not half as bad as I feared."

At least, not in most respects; and she had absolutely no intention of ever revealing to anyone how monstrous it was in other ways. For Squire Rundlewood turned out to be a grasping old lecher who had done the best he could, throughout the evening, to engage her in conversation — which wouldn't have been so terrible if that were all he'd tried to engage her in — and to her horror and dismay had managed, despite the company they were in, to use his distressingly long arm and agile hand to fondle her leg. And she had little doubt that if she hadn't sidled as close to Danvers as she could, the Squire would have molested her in even more shameful ways, as he seemed absolutely immune to the baleful looks she gave him, or to any of the rules of propriety that were supposed to be obeyed in proper society — particularly at the table of, and practically under the noses of her master and mistress.

Which was, of course, why the evening was so difficult. If Rundlewood had made such advances in any other setting she could have stabbed him with a fork, or better yet, a knife. A very sharp, very long knife. But she hadn't been able to think of anything she could do — at least, anything that had any effect on the Squire — that wouldn't have brought very unwelcome attention to her and her mistress.

Well, it was over now, and with any luck she wouldn't see the foul fellow ever again. And though he would probably spend considerable time savoring the liberties he'd taken with her person, and she would need more time than she could imagine to live down the encounter, at least she'd escaped without any public embarrassment.

"You seem quite thoughtful, miss," Jenny observed, as she folded the dress.

Moira startled, having completely forgotten that Jenny was there.

"I... was just thinking how grand the Hall is, and how lovely its mistress is — not to mention Miss Hobbs."

Jenny nodded. "They are nice-looking, aren't they? And so kind, too. That's a rarity, that is, for such fine-looking ladies to be so fine on the inside, as well." Jenny suddenly realized that being so good-looking herself, Moira might take her comment the wrong way, and hastened to add,

“Not that looking nice makes a woman worth any the less, of course — it’s just that a few aren’t as pretty on the inside as they are on the outside.”

Moira wryly smiled. “I suppose you could say the same about men, as well...” Particularly that snake, Rundlewood. In some ways that was a good thing, for if he looked as vile as he acted, people might run screaming at the sight of him. On the other hand, then he might not be invited to dinner parties, and be able to subject young girls to the horrors she suffered.

“Yes, I suppose you could,” Jenny agreed; for even though she didn’t know the particular viper Moira had in mind, she had met a few scoundrels, such as Blake, whose looks were far better than their character.

She helped Moira out of the undergarments that came with Elisabeth’s gown, while Moira tried to turn her thoughts to something other than Rundlewood.

“It was a very nice evening, in most ways. The food was absolutely delicious, and the conversation, as far as I could follow it, seemed very interesting.” Of course, if she hadn’t been busy trying to evade Rundlewood’s advances, she might have been able to follow things better, but...

Now, stop it. Stop it, right now. Just forget him, and try to think of other things.

“I imagine it must have felt quite grand to be in such company, what with the Mayor there and all.”

“Well, it did feel... interesting,” Moira admitted, “but I’m afraid I didn’t pay much attention to what was going on at the Master’s end of the table, as that conversation seemed to center on business affairs that were beyond my knowledge or understanding.”

Jenny nodded. “I suppose the discussion at the other end of the table was more to your liking.”

“Yes, it was. Miss Hobbs and Miss Woods were carrying on an animated conversation about their friends and neighbors, and though I had no idea who they were talking about, they made — or at least, Miss Hobbs made — such an effort to explain things that I found it very interesting.”

Jenny smiled. “I said she were a rare one. Always trying to make people feel at their ease. It’s too bad she’s had so much trouble with her health, and all. It don’t seem fair

that such a nice girl should have such troubles.”

Moira nodded. Even though Jenny had told her about Elisabeth’s lifelong battle with various ailments, it had been a shock to see how frail the girl looked. She must have lost considerable weight since she last wore the gown she lent Moira.

“It is too bad. It would be nice if the doctors could find some way to cure her.”

“Well, it isn’t as if they haven’t tried. This and that and the other thing, and as often as not what they tried just made things worse; but there is always hope that something will work.”

Moira thought of the things that were tried with little Susie, none of them of any use till it was discovered, quite by accident, that the girl was sickened by cow’s milk, of all things, and if they hadn’t been trying to fatten her up by giving her more than her share, would have gotten better all on her own. Of course, if the doctors had done all that Jenny implied, it wasn’t likely that Miss Hobbs’ problems would be so easily cured; but as she agreed, “Yes, one can always hope.”

“Well,” Jenny said as she handed Moira her nightdress, “I expect you must be tired after your long evening, and I do have plans of my own, so I’ll leave you to your own devices.”

Moira had little doubt as to what Jenny’s plans might be, and she smiled, as she slid into the gown.

“Of course. You and your ‘besotted’ young man. I shouldn’t have kept prattling on so. I imagine you must be anxious to see him.”

“That’s all right, miss. Waiting a bit will just make him all the more anxious to see me.” Jenny wished Moira a good night, accepted similar wishes on her behalf, and happily went on her way.

4

Moira blew out the light, then lay back on her pillow — well, Jenny's pillow, but it was hers for the moment — and gloomily reviewed the events of the evening. She had put on a brave front for Jenny, but now that she was alone she was filled with an almost overwhelming desire to run, even if she had to do so clad only in her nightclothes, all the way back to the Home, and beg Mistress Brown to let her return.

But she couldn't do that. Not that the headmistress would have turned her away. As kind as she'd always been, she was bound to take her in. But with all the time and trouble taken to train her, and to find her one position after another, she couldn't bear to embarrass herself or disappoint the headmistress again. No. She had to stay here and hope that Mistress Hobbs would have no further need of her services, save those for which she'd been hired — to watch over and train her children.

And really, if that were all that she had to do, she was bound to enjoy being here. She had always loved being with children, and there was never any lack of them at the Home, which was one reason she'd been so grateful to the headmistress for letting her stay after all of her peers had gone. She shouldn't let one bad experience spoil things for her. She should just consign Rundlewood and the memory of his assault to whatever perdition the gods had reserved for him, and think of tomorrow. Tomorrow would be a better day, beyond any doubt, and one that would come all too soon if she didn't stop brooding about things that were now in the past, and get some rest.

Still, thinking about them reminded her that she hadn't turned the latch when Jenny left; so she went to the door and took care of that. It felt strange to do so, as she'd never had a room with a lock before, but since Jenny had taken the time to explain its use, and the evening had been so unsettling, it seemed a prudent thing to do. Then she padded back to bed and lay down again.

A soft glow of moonlight, reflected off the fields and hills that surrounded the Hall, came through the window

and cast a ghostly luminescence over the contents of the room. If she'd had a west window, she might have risen and looked toward the town and the Home, hidden beyond the town, a few miles away. But the view, though lovely, was not toward the town but the mountains to the north, and though she might have admired the moonlight frosting their peaks on some other evening, all she wanted tonight was to sleep and forget what happened today. Absolutely everything that happened today.

Well, she thought, as a small smile lit her face, perhaps not everything. She had enjoyed meeting Jamie, and wouldn't want to forget their time together, no matter how little contact they might have in the future. She hoped that Katie knew what an exceptional young man she had, and would be as nice to him as she would have been if she were his girl, and not merely his friend. She yawned broadly and hoped that... hoped that...

A sigh escaped her, and while the moonlight slowly traced ever-changing patterns on the landscape outside, she drifted off and mused no more.



Rose sighed and turned from the window. For nearly three hours now, she'd been trying to rest, and instead had kept rising to look out the window toward the east, and the hills near Hobbs Hall.

At least Moira hadn't returned at once, so her feelings about the Hall's mistress had been confirmed. Far better sense than the others. Still, there was a small, selfish part of her that wished she had been sent back. Even as awful as that would have been for Moira, at least it would have kept her near for a little while longer.

She blinked away the tears rimming her eyes, and shook her head. She should be happy for Moira. It was a good position — a very good position — and it wasn't as though she'd never see her again. But it wouldn't be like before. She wouldn't see her and be glad of her presence every day, anymore. It might be weeks or even months between-times, and when they did meet their relationship would be different. Moira was no longer the little girl who

needed her care and protection, but a fine young woman who could stand on her own. But that didn't quell her desire to hold her in her arms and tell her how much she loved her, and had always loved her, as if her very own.

She lay down on the bed and turned away from the window. She would not rise again tonight, no matter how much she wanted to do so. She would not wish Moira back, not tonight, not tomorrow, nor ever again. She would wish only the best and happiest of futures for her, and that she would never regret leaving the Home.

She closed her eyes and tried to think of all the things she had to do tomorrow, and all the tomorrows after that; to fill her mind to overflowing with such tedious detail that there was no room for heartache. And though she didn't entirely succeed in her effort, she did finally drift off to sleep — a restless sleep, troubled by dreams she would not have wished to have; but at least not the nightmare her former charge was having.



“Come on, Katie; give us a little kiss.”

“But it's so dangerous,” she protested. “What if someone should want a late snack?”

Jamie laughed. “At this hour? By now, everyone should be sleeping like the dead — or at least the dead drunk.” That wasn't necessarily true; but since Katie had very belatedly informed him that she'd be sharing her room until the former governess left, it was the storeroom or nothing tonight, and being unwilling to settle for nothing, he'd convinced himself that the risk of being caught was too slight to matter.

But convincing Katie was another matter, and it took several minutes of playful cajolery to make her pay more attention to him than the door. So when she finally gave up her anxious watch, he was more than a little pleased with himself.

“Feeling more relaxed now?” he murmured, as he ran a line of soft kisses from her neck to her neckline.

“Oh, yes,” she sighed. “Still, you can't blame a girl for being... hmmm... that feels good... a bit nervous.”

“No, I can’t blame you for that, as long as it doesn’t keep me from doing this...” ‘This’ meaning the way he caressed her through the soft fabric encasing her breast.

Katie softly moaned, arched in his embrace, and for quite some time was lost in enjoyment of the pleasures to be found by a willing young woman in the arms of a determined young man. But as she strained toward the goal his nimble fingers had set before her, Jamie’s head jerked toward the door.

“Someone’s coming!”

Katie sagged against the counter, mind and body still reeling from the fires he’d roused within her.

“What?” she dazedly asked.

“Someone’s coming,” he repeated, shuttering the lamp; then pressed his lips against hers, to still any protest. Not that any would have been made, as she’d have been happy to give him her all were it not for her slowly dawning awareness of the sound of footsteps in the hall.

For a long moment they clung together, consumed by the fear of discovery. Then, as the sound slowly faded in the distance, each sighed a great sigh.

“Thank goodness that’s over,” she whispered, and nestled her head against his chest.

Jamie nodded and gave her a comforting caress. “Thank goodness, indeed.”

With danger now seemingly past, the caress stirred the embers so recently damped, and she smiled up at him — not that either could see much of the other in the near-darkness filling the room.

“So,” she huskily asked, “are you ready to finish what you started?” She reached between them to ensure that he was, but to her surprise, he stayed her hand.

“I’d better see what’s going on first, to make sure we aren’t interrupted.”

She nodded reluctant agreement, and Jamie opened the door and quietly padded in the direction the footsteps had taken.

As he neared the servants’ quarters he heard soft rumblings from the cross-hallway ahead, and peering round the corner saw Rundlewood hand something to Blake, then turn and enter Jenny’s room. He ducked round

the corner again, and puzzled over the situation.

He'd known the Squire was staying at the Hall, as word had been sent to the stables to bed his pair down for the night. But he ought to be in one of the guest rooms, upstairs. What was he doing with Jenny?

Well, there was no doubt what a man of the Squire's reputation would be doing with any girl he could get his hands on. Still, it was hard to imagine Jenny wanting to be with him. But if she didn't mean to be, then why was her door unlocked?

His ruminations were interrupted by the sound of footsteps, and not wanting a confrontation with Blake, who'd done his best to give him his worst day in recent memory, he hastily retreated to the storeroom.

Katie put down the jar of strawberry jam she'd been thinking of using one way or another. "Welcome, stranger," she purred, and wrapped him in eager embrace.

"Welcome, friend," he replied, enthusiastically returning the favor.

"So..." she mused, when they finally came up for air. "I take it there's nothing to worry about?"

"I don't think so; but it does seem odd, Jenny giving the Squire a tumble..."

"Jenny? And Rundlewood?" she said in surprise. "That *is* hard to believe. Although," she giggled, as he absent-mindedly took a familiar liberty with her bottom, "I'd hardly blame her for taking advantage of my being here, any more than I'd blame you for that."

"Mmm..." he rumbled, more to acknowledge her comment than to make any reply of his own. Then he jerked erect, while alarums went off in his mind.

"What do you mean, she's taking advantage of you being here?"

"Well," Katie bemusedly answered, while struggling to remove any impediment to greater intimacy, "here it's the first night she's sharing my room, and she's sharing it with Rundlewood. So it's a good thing we're here, or..."

"She's sharing *your* room? Then who's in..."

Jamie suddenly realized who must be in Jenny's room, and to Katie's surprise and distress, bolted from the room and tore down the hallway.



Moira wandered, lost and alone, through a dank, dark forest. She knew she had to find someone, or to flee from them; and not being sure which, even the soft pad of her footsteps on the leafy path seemed dangerously loud, though she moved with the greatest of caution.

The distant hoot of an owl filled the night with eerie foreboding, while a light breeze swayed the branches of the nearby trees, setting them to creaking an ominous reply, and she stopped, frozen with terror.

She took a deep breath to steady her nerves, then slowly turned her head, seeking some familiar view. Something snagged her hair, and she idly brushed at it, thinking it one of the low-hanging branches she'd passed; but it wouldn't release its hold, and she turned to deal with it. But it wasn't a branch. It was a hand — the hand of Squire Rundlewood, who was standing, half loathsome lecher above and tree trunk below, where an ordinary tree stood just a moment ago. He leered at her in a way filled with unpleasant meaning, and she cried out in horror and tried to run. Or at least her legs moved as if to run; but he held her fast with the one hand, and wrapping the other round her waist, pulled her against him and...

She startled out of her dream, her heart pounding wildly, her mind reeling with the terror the dream inspired. And in the next instant realized that as terrible as the dream was, she now faced an even more nightmarish reality.

The Squire smiled crookedly at her. "I thought that would wake you," he chuckled, as he caressed her breast.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed. "Get out! Get out, right now!"

Rundlewood grinned broadly. "Ah... going to play the reluctant miss, are you? That's a good one. I always like some spice in my girls."

He bent to kiss her again, and she struggled within his embrace, desperate to push him away; but he was far larger and stronger, and had her half-pinned beneath him. So if not for his willingness to encourage what he thought play-

acting, he could have easily overcome her resistance.

"I'm not..." she said, putting a bit of steel in her voice as hard and cold as the bit of steel she would have so gladly plunged into his heart, "not playing reluctant. I don't want you. I want you to get out... this instant... or I shall scream."

Rundlewood frowned. The girl was serious; she really didn't want him. Still, that had never kept him from having his way with a girl, so he cuffed her soundly and added a threatening tone to his voice.

"Now don't do that, my dear. We wouldn't want a scandal to mar the fine name of this home and cost you your position, now would we?"

For just an instant, the realization that she might lose not only her virtue but also her position filled Moira with such dismay that she stiffened, and stifled the scream about to erupt from her throat. And in that instant Rundlewood forced his mouth hard against hers, and removed any chance she might have had to correct her mistake.

She flailed at him wildly with the hand not pinned beneath him, but he twisted it behind and beneath her, and once she was powerless to resist him, slid the hem of her nightgown upward until...

The door burst open, and a figure strode through the opening, silhouetted against the light from the hall. Rundlewood's head turned toward the intruder, and Moira cried out, "Help me! Please!"

"I think you'd best let the young lady go, Squire," Jamie growled, as he approached the bed.

"Go away," Rundlewood hissed, "and leave your betters alone."

"I might do that if there was anyone here who deserved that description," Jamie replied, lifting his hands as if begging the Squire to attack him. "But I don't see anyone better than a pig here, save for the young la..."

Rundlewood roared with anger, and with a move incredibly quick for someone of his age and size, rolled off the bed and rushed at Jamie. In the same instant Moira scooted backwards as far as she could, cowering against the headboard, while Jamie, deftly stepping to the side, reached for the chair by the dresser, and swinging it in a wide arc, hit the Squire as hard as he could.

“Damn you!” the Squire bellowed, as the chair and his right arm broke under the force of Jamie’s blow. “You’ve broken my arm, you bastard!”

“Takes one to know one, I guess,” Jamie murmured, and kicked the Squire, who was half prostrate on the floor, in a way guaranteed to incapacitate him. The Squire doubled over in pain, and Jamie moved to the bedside and took Moira in his arms.

“Oh, Jamie,” she cried, as she wrapped her arms around him and collapsed in tears.

“It’s all right, miss,” he replied, as he stroked her hair. “He won’t molest you any more.”

Moira sobbed and sobbed, and Jamie cooed soft words of comfort into her ear, until Rundlewood staggered to his feet, swore they would rue this night, and lurched into the hall.

Jamie watched the Squire go, then turned his attention to Moira, whose face had turned white with fear when the Squire rose. “Are you all right, miss? He... didn’t hurt you, did he?”

Moira shook her head. “No. He... he tried; but you came...” She buried her head in his chest and burst into tears again, and Jamie breathed a sigh of relief.

Meanwhile Rundlewood, who was not the kind of man to take insult or injury lying down, roused the household, cursing Jamie and Moira and the Fates which had placed them in his path, and swearing that unless the most terrible things were done to them he would see that everyone else suffered, in every way he could manage.

As a result, by the time Moira finally began to recover her senses, Master Hobbs appeared at her door, with the Squire, still loudly cursing, and Edwards.

“That’s enough, Squire,” Hobbs said, motioning to the butler. “I’ll take care of this and, you may be sure, take care of it well.” The butler escorted Rundlewood away, suggesting that now that Hobbs was in charge of things perhaps they should do something about the Squire’s arm. And despite his desire to see the punishment meted out to Moira and Jamie, the Squire had to admit that a good idea, for the longer his arm went without care the more it hurt, and he was now quite white with pain.

Hobbs set his lamp on the dresser and closed the door behind him. Frowningly noting Jamie and Moira's intimate position and her state of undress he began, "All right. I want to know exactly why I find you like this, and the Squire with a broken arm."

Jamie flushed. "It's not what you think, or at least, not what I imagine he's told you."

"And if it isn't, then what is it?"

"He tried to rape her, and would have done it if I hadn't had the good fortune to stop him."

Hobbs frowned more deeply, and looked at Moira. "Is that true?"

Moira bowed her head in shame. "Y... yes... it is..." she said, in a barely audible whisper.

"Would you be willing to swear to it in a court of law?"

"I would," Jamie defiantly said.

"If... it is necessary..." Moira added, with a shudder.

"Even though, if you couldn't prove the truth of your statement, Rundlewood would see you in prison?"

"I'd go to the gallows rather than let him get away with what he tried to do to her," Jamie declared.

A grim smile played on Hobbs' lips as he considered Jamie's statement, and a very different light on the night's events which that statement suggested; for though he liked Jamie, he had heard rumors of his involvement with members of the opposite sex.

"You must be very much in love with her," he observed.

"What? Me? In love with her?"

"Well, she is very beautiful, and here she is, half undressed, in your arms, and what other reason could you have to be willing to die for her?"

"Good god, no, sir!" Jamie exclaimed. "She's barely fourteen! I wouldn't! I couldn't! At least..." He paused, as he realized that given how good she felt in his arms, he might very well have tried to seduce her under different circumstances.

God, he thought, I'm no better than Rundlewood. A surge of anger flared within him at his own weakness, and at all men who took advantage of young girls, and he glared at Hobbs.

"I don't care what you think. I didn't do anything to her,

and I wouldn't. I just don't want to see her suffer because of what that rat tried to do."

"Please, sir... don't blame Jamie," Moira begged. "He was only trying to help. It's my fault. It's the curse I bear, that draws such men to me..." Her voice trailed off as she realized the inevitable end of her current catastrophe.

Hobbs studied them for a few moments, then slowly nodded. "I believe you. Rundlewood is a viper, and I'm sure he deserved all that you gave him, and more."

"Thank god," Jamie replied, visibly sagging with relief; and tears streamed down Moira's cheeks, as the tension within her eased.

"There, there," Jamie cooed, patting her back. "It will be all right, now."

"I'm afraid it won't be all right."

Jamie's head snapped toward Hobbs. "What?"

"It won't be all right. I accept your version of the story. But that doesn't change the fact that Rundlewood is a powerful man, and defying his wishes is not something to be done lightly."

Jamie stared at him. "So you're going to sell us out, to satisfy that scum?"

Hobbs shook his head. "No. Not exactly. But you will have to go, James. And I think as far and as fast as you can, for Rundlewood wants you in jail, and as loath as I am to do it, I'll have to send for the sheriff. In the meantime, I'll lock you in the old storeroom. In case you've forgotten, there's a door hidden behind the back cabinets which will afford you escape. Rundlewood won't be happy about it, but he'll have no way of disproving my claim that I'd forgotten the door."

Jamie nodded, as he well remembered the secret passageway from when he was a child.

"But at least you can save Moira — right?"

Hobbs sighed, and shook his head. "I'm afraid she will have to go too, though I expect she can go back to the Home, instead of leaving the district."

"Why? Why should she go?"

"Surely you can see that there will be a scandal, no matter what we do this night. And no matter how fine her character, I cannot allow, and I am sure my wife will not allow, someone tainted with scandal to take care of our

children.”

“Even though she did nothing wrong...”

“Even though she did nothing wrong. I’m sorry, miss — but you will have to go, as well.”

Moira numbly nodded, while Jamie shook his head. “All right. But there’s one thing, or else I’ll not run, but will swear out a complaint and raise a stink that will spoil whatever plans you and the Squire are hatching.”

Hobbs sighed. “If I can do it. But remember, there is little that you or I can do, and a lot that the Squire can, with his broken arm to attest to your attack.”

“I don’t care about me; but I want something for Moira. A paper signed by you and your wife, stating that she is a fine, upstanding girl, that you are sorry you had to let her go, and that you give her your best wishes and highest recommendation.”

“Your time here has done you credit,” Hobbs noted with amusement. “I’m sure neither of us would have ever imagined, when I took you in, that you would become such a well-spoken young man.”

Jamie flushed, not wanting to be reminded, especially in front of Moira, of the state he was in when Hobbs carried him into the Hall, fourteen years ago. Particularly when, despite all that had happened since then, he would soon be back on his own again.

“Will you give her a recommendation?”

Hobbs nodded. “I will. I doubt it will do any good, as word of this is bound to get out, and no family of quality will have her; but I shall give her a note before she leaves.”

Jamie looked at Moira, then at Hobbs. “In that case you’d best get busy writing it, because we’ll be gone within the half hour.”



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